

CHAPTER 9

Terms of Transition: The Action Film, Postmodernism, and Issues of an East-West Perspective

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The way in which the American system itself undertakes to incorporate exotic elements from abroad—samurai culture here, South African music there, John Woo films here, Thai food there, and so forth.

—Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue"

At first glance, the ultraviolent action films made in the United States and Hong Kong since the mid-1980s seem a perfect case study for considering postmodern culture as an allegory of late/global/finance capitalism.¹ Some key elements of a transnational genre are definitely present:

- The films are produced and circulated within capitalist commercial culture.
- They are reciprocally exchanged and widely exported on the world market.
- They have a generic identity that combines similar styles and themes.
- They share an emphasis on violent spectacle and allegorical narrative.
- They have influenced each other.
- There are actual relations, most obviously the move of Hong Kong directors John Woo and Ringo Lam and stars Chow Yun Fat, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li to Hollywood.

I do not want to argue against these films' similarities and relations, though they need qualification and elaboration. Rather, it is unsatisfactory to project this genre as an instance of postmodern culture if we think of the postmodern as a completely new moment. The ultraviolent action films are more than simply an expressive form of a new global capitalism. In particular, their appeal to audiences and the way they deal with their subject matter draw on older aesthetic currents, especially from European Romanticism up through the twentieth century.

The Action Film as Cultural Type

In *Irma Vep* (Olivier Assayas, France, 1996), a movie about the making of a movie, Maggie Cheung (Zhang Manyu) plays herself cast in a made-for-TV remake of the silent serial *Les Vampires* (Louis Feuillade, France, 1915–16). On the set, the Hong Kong star is interviewed (in English) by a French television “journalist who loves John Woo” (Antoine Basler), as he is identified in the credits. The interviewer immediately reveals himself as not concerned with the star but obsessed with action films, which he sees as vastly superior to the kind of “intellectual cinema” that the director within the film, René Vidal (Jean-Pierre Léaud), makes. The reporter esteems John Woo, Jean-Claude Van Damme, and Arnold Schwarzenegger as true cinéastes. Cheung, throughout the film, exhibits a courteous, gracious professionalism while the characters around her project their own desires on her. She politely demurs at the reporter’s questions and assertions, explaining that she has not worked with Woo, who in any case excels with male actors. She says that variety in cinema is a good thing.

These comic ironies dramatize some of the contradictions at the heart of contemporary transnational commercial culture. The action film is triumphant in the international market, and in a world in which commercial success trumps any other aesthetic concern, that says it all. In the film *Irma Vep*, when director Vidal meets with his star before filming, he shows her an action clip from *The Heroic Trio* (Dongfang sanxia; Hong Kong, Johnny To and Ching Siu-tung, 1992) and explains that he cast her because of her graceful movement. She replies that stunt doubles did that sequence. Even the most knowledgeable specialist, in this case a burned-out nouvelle vague director, uses Hong Kong action film to project his own fantasies. So not only the character “Maggie Cheung” but also the whole category “Hong Kong action film” are repositories of Western desire. This orientalist vision contributes to the legend that U.S. independent upstart directors such as Quentin Tarantino recirculate Hong Kong action elements—first as fans of a “low” genre, and later as filmmakers in their own right, borrowing Hong Kong style and imagination to invigorate U.S. commercial cinema. Just as *Irma Vep*’s television journalist finds John Woo “strong,”² so the fan cult endorses, with a self-congratulatory twist, a special version of the boys’ fantasy world of action cinema. A college or cinematic education does not change the fantasy; rather it widens the range of consumption, allowing a more cosmopolitan or exotic taste.³

But by now this story is well known, and here I am less concerned with simply retelling it than with drawing out a correlative point, which I think addresses a much more lasting issue in East-West relations. Specifically, how do we analyze postmodern capitalist culture? Probably the most influential statement of this problem has been in the various works of Marxist critic Fredric Jameson. He argues that three stages of culture—realism, modernism, and postmodernism—are expressive forms of three stages of capitalist production: industrial capital, advanced monopoly/Fordist capital, and late or global capital. In opening the discussion of postmodernism about twenty years ago, Jameson stressed the remarkable changes from a culture of modernism to postmodernism to make the point that we have arrived at a new stage of culture. Subsequently, he and others have concentrated on the differences, on the changes. And as other cul-

tural analysts have gone back and extended this kind of analysis, “modernism” has been redefined and fleshed out in relation to “modernity.”

Thus the artistic/cultural movement (modernism) is linked more decisively to modernity, a more general social condition. This has given scholars a certain productive purchase on thinking through the art-and-society relation that surpasses the limits of the crudest base/superstructure model or the limited terrain of, for example, Lukacs’s denouncing modernism while celebrating realism. But Jameson’s framing of aesthetic and cultural stages has also led to an impasse in thinking, because in using the concept of a decisive break between realism and modernism, or modernism and postmodernism, a cultural analyst is forced to stress the antinomies of difference rather than the unity of a contradiction, or the unresolved and evolving nature of cultural, social, political, and economic transformation.

I want to argue that on a global scale we cannot arrive at the best analysis by assuming the separation of these moments/movements. Rather, to understand the cultural production of the capitalist era, we must first see the cultural process as a whole, as a changing and shifting sequence not of successive phases but of overlapping ones, waves which change and transmit. I make this claim most decisively because in my own field of literary and visual communications, popular commercial culture today is not simply “postmodern” and different, but also “modern,” and “realist,” and especially “romantic.” In other words, if we look at the field of cultural production as a social as well as an aesthetic phenomenon, we can see much deeper and persistent structures—structures that change, to be sure, but structures that remain essential to accounting for contemporary culture. For example, the dominant narrative forms of Hollywood cinema today are the dominant forms of nineteenth-century European/North American theater. Today’s commercial screenwriter writes with exactly the same principles of Eugene Scribe’s *pièce bien faite*. Which might remind us that Scribe was so successful in mid-nineteenth-century Paris that he actually farmed out much of his well-made playwriting to hired hands, saving the smoothing out and the sale for himself—not much different from the traditional studio system or the Hollywood blockbuster film process today.

The Action Genre

“Action films serve the same function as Westerns—they present morality plays, albeit with cursing, a lot more blood, and violence, and tits,” comments actor Bruce Willis. “In my mind, a big, exciting, thrilling, scary, violent film is no different from the newest ride at Disney World. You’re sitting in a darkened room with 100 or 200 people, and these little flashing points of light on the screen are able to scare you, thrill you, make you jump. That’s the trick. That’s the art form.”

—Marshall Julius, *Action!*

Without analyzing the international action film genre in detail (a monographic specialist project that would obscure my main point here), I want to outline what such a proj-

ect would involve. In particular, I want to forestall assumptions that this is an “easy” thing to do, or that the task’s outcome can be predicted in advance because we are dealing with a “vulgar” form—mass culture at its most commercially triumphant. The intellectual and academic prejudice against action film, in some cases even within film studies, has prevented a deeper analysis.

So, what would we have to do to compare and contrast Hollywood and Hong Kong action films in order to offer a comprehensive analysis of their uniqueness and their relation? There is no proper first step to such a project but, obviously, defining terms and finding a tentative basis for comparison is a start. For my purposes I will (tentatively) lop off some forms we might include on the Hong Kong side, such as the earlier martial-arts examples and the Chinese ghost stories and the comedies. On the Hollywood side, we can bracket for the time the earlier action form of the western and the disaster film (*Towering Inferno*, *Titanic*). But these are simply movements of critical efficiency, and any second thoughts immediately become productive in another direction.

Hollywood does produce a series of films that combine the supernatural and action, usually in a horror/fantasy/near-future sci-fi form, but those seldom receive substantial critical attention. So, let’s say we have trimmed the field to films with contemporary settings, predominantly masculine adventures, cop and criminal stories, and high levels of “operatic bloodshed.” A typical way a film critic might proceed would be to develop a cross-national genre description through the comparison and contrast of specific films, accounting for changing genre conventions. Since generic analysis involves both stylistic and subject matter analyses, the elaboration of narrative themes and the figures of visual style, editing (sound and visual), dramatic pace, and so forth would then be worked out. The obvious themes include: cop/criminal relations; codes of honor among thieves; codes of knights/warriors; situations of females, especially female fighters; patterns of undercover investigation; importance of urban settings; ineffectuality of the justice system; foreign or exotic settings, et cetera. These themes are embodied most acutely in key moments that depict gunfights and their aftermath, explosive detonations, and massive destruction of property and people. These moments function not only to advance the story line but also to articulate generic style elements. That is, it is not only the presence of such moments that marks the genre, but also the particular way they are presented visually. For example, we commonly see the once new, now worn “bulletcam” shot (the bullet’s point of view shot rushing forward to the target), as well as the “Mexican standoff” (a suspended moment with figures in close quarters, guns drawn and pointed at each other). Probably the single most characteristic visual style element in the action genre is the shot of an expanding orange fireball with a silhouetted figure in the foreground running toward the camera. The shot expresses violence, danger, our own position as spectators, and our emotional tie to the threatened hero, who is barely escaping death. Just in time. Thrills and chills.

So, for a tentative working definition of the genre: a male-oriented narrative (if there is a central woman, she takes a masculine role) featuring violent combat, especially with gunplay, whose earlier and other forms include martial arts ranging from hand-to-hand combat to swashbuckling swordplay to technological combat (for example, *Top Gun*).

There is an emphasis on the hero's body, especially as it is punished, and sometimes the films feature an excessive body, as in the Terminator or cyborg forms (an aspect that oscillates between anxiety about and assertion of masculinity).⁴

Having assembled our projection of what comprises the field, we might then begin to examine the genre further by considering authorship—that is, directors well noted in the genre and stars who appear in it. And we could begin to look at influence and reception. In this stage of analysis, we might see influences as reciprocal. Hollywood as the dominant global form of cinema obviously shapes other cinemas, but in the case of Hong Kong action film, we also see the influence of Hong Kong action on a generation of younger U.S. directors such as Tarantino and Rodriguez (*El Mariachi*).

Economically, we would need to also consider questions of film import and export, noting that Hong Kong action films initially entered the United States as cinema for the Chinese diasporic audience—via theaters in some communities, but more importantly on video, a far less transient and site-specific means of diffusion. Obviously, we would note the presence of John Woo and Ringo Lam in Hollywood in the 1990s, as well as Chow Yun Fat's Hollywood debut in *The Replacement Killers* (1997), and perhaps Jean-Claude Van Damme's appearing in Hong Kong settings, if not Hong Kong films.⁵ But to say this, perhaps we are not saying anything new. Hollywood has always been willing to import directors and stars for financial gain.⁶ And after a certain point in the development of film finance and evolved production processes, Hollywood often films abroad. So, an adequate study of transnational "genre" films could not simply rely on analyzing the most direct actual relations (*rappports du fait*). We would soon see the need to consider larger institutional and economic issues in order to define the action film genre.

For that kind of institutional analysis, which considers the relation between marketing and film style, I turn to another term, "High Concept." High Concept refers to a general strategy for marketing Hollywood film.⁷ Developed in the mid-1970s, High Concept aims not at making art, but at making money. The essence of a High Concept production and marketing strategy is that a film should have a simple pitch (a description of the story) that can be summed up in a single image (for example, *Independence Day*—alien invaders blow up the White House). Such films are star powered; saturation advertised, especially on television, before release; and saturation released, opening everywhere the same day. Above all, high-concept films are aimed at a specific, but very large, audience—youth and the moviegoing mass audience. The films are presold by being generic and thus instantly familiar, or they may recycle comic books, television series, and so on. Furthermore, they are often successfully connected to merchandising and tie-ins (Disney is the master of this), even though violent action seldom finds an easy merchandising tie-in except for the superhero subgenre (*Batman*) or animals (*Jurassic Park*).

High Concept is the general strategy, driven by marketing, which then decisively shapes the contemporary action genre. In Hollywood, money is made on hits. As a contemporary capitalist institution, film finance capital seeks the blockbuster and thus shares many aspects of speculative capital, such as that invested in wildcat oil well drilling. At the same time, through media/entertainment conglomerations, the system

tries to smooth out speculation at the delivery end. U.S. capital invested in the culture industries colonizes new areas of consumption. Examples range from Disney turning children into consumers to Rupert Murdoch purchasing baseball and soccer teams while trying to dominate satellite television delivery and product to China and the Asian sub-continent. Although a genre study of U.S. and Hong Kong action cinema and their interrelationship would seem to start by talking simply about films and cultural texts, sooner rather than later, the analysis must consider global capitalism. But let me return to that point further on.

High Concept massively changes dominant fiction films, and the action film in particular, especially in style. The High Concept feature rests on a high level of technical achievement, especially in terms of digital special effects and production design, and this technical apparatus for production cannot be matched by smaller cinemas. For such films as *Terminator 2*, *Independence Day*, and *Mission: Impossible*, there is no competition. Style includes both image and sound track, and today sound and image are closely related, as in music videos. It is no accident that the first-time-out director of *The Replacement Killers*, Antoine Fuqua, had a background in commercials and music videos: The only thing he had to “prove” with a debut feature was that he could apply his established skilled style to a full-length narrative; he needed to concern himself only minimally with directing actors in spoken dialogue. Sound is important, but on the sound track, music and sound effects dominate over dialogue. Bold images predominate over character psychology, and character is already a given because character and star image fuse. Thus, narrative is fused with spectacle, telling a story with pictures, physical stunts, special effects, and music. A full and integrated production design fused with highly coordinated cinematography and rapid editing become the most expressive parts of the whole. The form becomes much like the Hollywood musical genre, with sequences and “numbers” as the dominant elements.

From this vantage point, we can see the sense of John Woo’s frequent statements in interviews that his own filmmaking was especially influenced by the Hollywood musical. His “bullet ballet” work meshes exactly with the High Concept action genre in a choreographing of heroic bloodshed.

***Face/Off*: Romantic Heroes in a Melodramatic Narrative**

As new as High Concept filmmaking is, one of the most striking characteristics of ultraviolent action films, be they made in Hong Kong or in the United States, is the persistence of older patterns alongside new expressive forms. The characters who hold the most advanced weapons embody cultural types who first appeared on the world stage about two hundred years ago. To provide an example of this phenomenon of mixed forms, I will sketch in an aspect of John Woo’s *Face/Off* (1997) to set up my conclusion about the political implications of mixed aesthetics across generations.

In *Face/Off*'s title sequence, master criminal Castor Troy (initially Nicolas Cage), working in the service of international terrorism, prepares a special high-tech chemical biological bomb that will kill millions of people in Los Angeles. This advanced urban terrorism is right out of the headline news. The crazed criminal derives from the figure of the amoral man of action, a superman beyond the ordinary, from the early nineteenth century, who like Balzac's Vautrin hurls himself against a bankrupt society "like a cannonball." Only the weaponry is updated. Castor Troy reiterates the power of the nineteenth-century gothic as a blasphemous, even satanic, figure posing as a priest in this opening scene and also in the final shootout in a Catholic church, where he is explicitly perverse in mimicking the pose of Jesus on the cross.

Troy's opponent is an alienated romantic antihero, FBI agent Sean Archer (initially John Travolta), embittered and obsessed with catching Troy since the criminal killed the cop's young son six years earlier while trying to assassinate Archer himself. Again, in a replication of Romanticism's fascination with the doppelgänger, the film shows not simply the metaphoric equation of cop and criminal as fundamentally linked or increasingly alike as the pursuit continues, but literally produces this identity switch with each taking on the other's face (thanks to high-tech surgery) and then carrying on his business and personal life, in disguise, on the other's turf. For all the emphasis on computers, advanced medicine, and repeated shootouts in the contemporary urban environment, *Face/Off*'s story line is deeply embedded in the family, both in Archer's domestic space and in Troy's criminal family. While the criminal double invades Archer's middle-class family, the undercover cop ends up saving Troy's son and finally adopting that child, replacing his own lost son. Both protagonists enact different but overlapping aspects of romantic masculinity. We see them firmly located within a contemporary setting while the plot line plays out a nineteenth-century melodrama.⁸

Face/Off's pattern displays extreme parallels following the two protagonists which reaches its most spectacular high point in the FBI raid at the hideout. Sean Archer (looking like Castor Troy) escapes prison and arrives at drug dealer Dietrich's warehouse-sized place. Treated as friend and hero, he's obliged to take drugs, and he meets Dietrich's sister Sasha. Earlier in his FBI role, he threatened her with loss of her child if she didn't help capture Troy. Now in an astonishing twist on the recognition scene, Sasha reveals that Castor is the father of five-year-old Adam. Archer flashes back to his own son, killed at age six by Castor. While he hugs the boy, the FBI attack directed by Troy-as-Archer begins. In the mayhem and gun battle that follow, Archer acts to protect the child.

Using an elaborate variation on the famous set piece standoff and shootout in Woo's *The Killer* (Hong Kong, 1990) in which a blind woman is caught between the cop and the hitman, unable to know what is going on during the gunfight, the child wears earphones and is the audience's subjective sound point of view during the battle. The music swells as the gunfire fades, and an elaborate slow-motion montage sequence begins with the kid's Walkman (and the audience soundtrack) hearing Olivia Newton-John's version of "Somewhere over the Rainbow." The sequence proceeds with intense visual

action counterpointed by the dreamy musical lyricism. All pretense of realism disappears while epic operatic spectacle takes over.

The second stage of the shootout presents the film's most dramatic "face-off" as the two protagonists meet in a circular room of mirrors, reminiscent of Orson Welles's famous set in *Lady from Shanghai* (1948). On opposite sides of a mirror partition, the cop and criminal prepare to shoot it out.

TROY-LOOKING-LIKE-ARCHER (played by Travolta). (Sigh) I don't know what I hate wearing worse, your face or your body. I mean, I enjoy boning your wife, but—let's face it—we both like it better the other way. Yes. So why don't we just trade back?

ARCHER-LOOKING-LIKE-TROY (played by Cage). You can't give back what you've taken from me.

TROY. Oh, well, plan B. Let's just kill each other. (The gunfight begins again.)

The pair face each other (spatially), with each looking at back-to-back mirrors, and thus each faces an image of himself—which is itself a false image, since each is literally wearing the other's face—and fires his weapon at the other, who is spatially on the other side of the set of mirrors. This dizzying reflexive and ironic play of image and identity is further multiplied by our knowledge of each actor's star persona and previous roles. Each actor is obviously also enjoying playing with the characteristic signature actions of the other. The result is a commercial version of Romantic irony of a high order indeed.

Almost all the characteristics commonly ascribed to Romantic heroes apply to one or both of the leads: the individual, exceptional hero's exhibiting either introversion or exhibitionism; narrative pathos, with the script's concentration on emotions, passions, and inner struggles; the characters' melancholy, nursing a grievance, suffering to the point of madness, and fearing loss of identity; the visual style's dramatizing the monstrous, diseased satanic and grotesque, enacting cruelty and egotism; the protagonist's and antagonist's marking of the double, a shadow self; the male leads' inability to communicate with others and misrecognizing their own environment. This is a world first explored in nineteenth-century melodrama. It is a moral universe populated by clearly identifiable villains and victims, with open confrontations between good and evil. It is also a world of the patriarchal family in which male authority and family security are threatened and in which the prime motives for actions are familial relations. Melodrama's plots and situations revolve around secrets and aspects of the past that produce suspicions and misrecognitions, and the plot's final revelations try to restore innocence and justice. From the nineteenth-century theatrical tradition, suspenseful narratives and scenes of rescue are enacted in body-oriented performance, heightened with music and sound effects, and theatricalized by set and lighting. Remarkable spectacles have long combined with the drama of real life to produce strong emotional responses in the audience. In *Face/Off*, it is all there: romantic heroes face off against each other in a highly melodramatized story and setting.

Romanticism/Postmodernism in the Asian/Western Moment

Capitalism by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier. Thus the creation of the physical conditions of exchange—of the means of communication and transport—the annihilation of space by time—becomes an extraordinary necessity for it.

—Marx, *The Grundrisse*

How should we understand contemporary cultural transitions between East and West? What is the nature of the relations we are witnessing between Asia and the West in popular cinema? Is the local, the regional, being lost and absorbed into the transnational, the global, with postmodern Hollywood triumphant? If we look at the leading edge of cultural change, particularly in mass-mediated culture, we can easily accept the apparent fact of postmodernism, whether we celebrate it as wonderful (in global capitalist triumph), accept it as inevitable (in a kind of Baudrillardian frenzy), regret it (in a nostalgia for high culture and national tradition), or face it with anxiety. Considering the action film with specific reference to Hong Kong, we can easily imagine it transformed, with post-1997 Hong Kong film production absorbed within China, losing its dialect, losing its characteristic forms and themes, and even losing its major directors and some of its stars to Hollywood. Gone, absorbed elsewhere, diced and blended in the post-modern space/time compression.

I want to argue against that kind of analysis. To assume postmodernism is the cultural expression of a new stage of capitalism is appealing because the idea contains an important and profound truth. But to leap to the conclusion that postmodernity or capitalism is in the process of a complete transformation, that cultural expressions are changing with it (in some ways in advance of it), or that we are at a different stage is deceptive and precipitous. The business people, politicians, and intellectuals who see the world while flying from one airport to another seldom observe the millions of children doing stoop labor in the rice paddies and fields below, living at or below subsistence, and deprived of an education. In the United States and Europe, relocating apparel sweatshops, electronic manufacturing, and heavy polluting industry to global free-enterprise zones removes the most visibly exploited part of the workforce from the nation, but it does not erase its global existence. Capitalism depends on extractive and exploitative relations between people and with nature—be that fishing and polluting the seas or removing fuel and forests from the land. These are facts, and no amount of pious triumphalism about the “failure of communism” can change them. (And with the current situation in Russia and the Asian economies, should we be talking about the “failure of capitalism”?)

We should try to understand and analyze new trends and new developments, whether by Jameson’s considering postmodern/global architecture, cinema, or literature, or the ongoing work of a new generation of scholars such as those writing in the major Asian

studies cultural journal *Positions*. But we should also realize that, especially with mass-mediated popular culture forms, changes on the leading edge do not effect a total transformation.

As I have tried to show with the example of the ultraviolent action film today, and in the very recent past, the move to a cinema of spectacular effects is more “universal,” but only in a certain direction—such spectacle creates a larger potential market but at the loss of character and psychology that seem too local, too specific. Action film can demonstrate and play with deep anxieties about masculinity, especially as in the case of *Face/Off*. This masculinity, which cannot really protect the family, cannot be effectively patriarchal. This is, of course, the anxiety created by capitalism itself—that the father, the wage earner, the worker, cannot protect the family from the unnatural disasters of unemployment, personal crime, and an increasingly heartless world. These cultural forms that play with the precariousness of gender roles and the family first appear in a substantial way in the West with the rise of capitalism, with the expansion of industrial capital, the factory system, urban concentration, political democracy, new and expanded technologies of transportation and communication. But these changes, marking the transition from feudalism to capitalism, are still going on in the developing world (and at times reversing the trend, as with the Taliban period in Afghanistan). And capitalism in the industrial/commercial/financial core is still seeking to control even more of life, turning what was private, familial, separate, a haven, into something from which money can be made. Television’s entering the U.S. home in the 1950s is only one of the most visible markers of that change. In the United States today, formerly familial and socially organized services such as healthcare and eldercare are being transformed into commercial operations. Formerly “independent” professionals such as doctors are brought into the commercial healthcare system. Every site—hospital, school, kitchen, or bedroom—is transformed into a profit center.⁹ And thus it also becomes a potential locus of class conflict.

On a global scale, we have to see contemporary late capitalism as expanding both in the former periphery and also in the core. But this means that the same old struggles of transformation seen in early and mature capitalism are also present as active processes in this expansion aspect of late capitalism. The old struggles exist alongside new forms of conflict and contradiction caused by transformations in the most advanced sectors and sites. So, postmodernity, as the cultural expression of a globalized late capitalism, must be understood as containing within it earlier cultural forms as well as newer post-modern ones. Many of the aesthetic and cultural expressions of European Romanticism appear in contemporary cultural forms, though not all and certainly not in exactly the way they originally appeared. And that is because the economic and social transformations that gave rise to such expressions are still going on.

Thus Romanticism, realism, and modernism can be viewed as the cultural forms of emergent, industrial, and Fordist capital, but only if we also understand that they remain a significant part of the mix. Postmodernism does not displace these previous forms. It absorbs them and transforms them into something still possible, still expressive, still speaking to the audience.

Notes

1. The reference is to the ongoing work of Fredric Jameson.
2. He is speaking English and bluntly translates from the French *fort*, adding another irony for the bilingual members of the audience, perhaps reminding us that *Irma Vep* initially circulates within the European Economic Community, and that Cheung passes through the film knowing only English, with French as virtually a “background” language—another comment on current cultural shifts. At the same time, the scene repeats/references an interview by Jean-Marie Melville with Jean Seberg in Godard’s *A Bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1959).
3. Reviewing Woo’s *Hard Target*, Georgia Browne notes a cadre of New York City fans who whoop “Woo! Woo!” during his films, including retrospectives of his Hong Kong work. “Let It Bleed,” *Village Voice*, 31 August 1993, 51.
4. An excellent analysis of these aspects of U.S. action film is Yvonne Tasker’s *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993).
5. For an extended discussion of Woo in international context, see Ann T. Ciecko, “Transnational Action: John Woo, Hong Kong, Hollywood,” in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, 221–237 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).
6. For example, Austria, which never had a substantial film industry, provided a series of directors in the classical Hollywood period: Eric von Stroheim, Fritz Lang, Joseph von Sternberg, Edgar G. Ulmer, Otto Preminger, Billy Wilder, and Fred Zimmermann.
7. Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).
8. I have discussed melodrama and the action hero in “Class in Action,” in James and Berg, *The Hidden Foundation*, 240–263; “Realist Melodrama and the African-American Family: Billy Woodberry’s *Bless Their Little Hearts*,” in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, ed. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill, 157–166 (London: British Film Institute, 1994); “Notes on Melodrama and the Family Under Capitalism,” in Landy, *Imitations of Life*.
9. The introduction in the United States of a new oral drug, Viagra, for male impotence (at ten dollars a dose) puts a pricetag on (some) males’ sexuality. It is already embroiled in controversy over how many a physician can prescribe in (capitalist) “managed care” health plans and in the government-sponsored subsidy for the retired and the poor.

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